

Wise Whispers from the Granny Witches

Now I want you little sisters to remember this one thing if you don't recollect another thing: dying ain't the worst thing that'll ever happen to you. The worst thing is to die before you get your call. And let me tell you the truth as I know it. You there, you lean in and listen well. Some folks don't die at all. Some folks just *leave*. The wild will call and they'll be *gone*, just like that. And the choice between the two is yours. You can die off like some poor ol' feral cat, or you can *leave* when the call comes. And it will come one bright day, whether you answer or not. But you've got to listen, you know. The loudest words ain't never said out loud, and the wisest words are plain and barely spoken above a whisper. And the wild's call will only whisper; it won't come hollering like a banshee in your ear. So listen, gal. Listen good and listen long...

Photo by Shelby Lee Adams

When I was still blessed with a naïve mind, Granny's advice was often blown around like one of those little white butterflies that flit on the breeze in the summertime. They're bright and quick enough to grab your attention, but not colorful or captivating enough to hold it. I've come to surmise it's best to always speak plain and not soak your words in honey just so folks can swallow them easier. Speak plain, or you just might be misunderstood, and there's few things worse than that, except for maybe dying off and not hearing your call.

Wise whispers and plain words, yes. Plain is good. It's Granny that I think of now, with her plain words and plain eyelet aprons and plain white dishes. Plain face, too. She never had any use for pretty. No, plain is best, she'd always remind us. Let folks see the pie instead of the plate. Only give them words they can't twist up and confuse and use against you. And a face full of pretty don't mean a damn without some sense and character. Pretty is a curse, young sisters. Pretty runs off eventually and leaves a gal bereft and pining for it. Plain is best. You won't miss what you never had, I reckon.

Sarah Belcher, Granny's mama, and my 2nd great granny. Left on Sept. 13, 1942, when the wild called. On the left is Granny Dixie as a young girl.

Granny is not pretty. Not on the outside, anyway. She wears that shawl that envelopes the slight of her shoulders, crocheted by her own hands with faded scarlet yarn from her cedar chest. She dabs vanilla extract on her pulse and pinches her high cheekbones a time or two for rouge. Her countenance puts you in the mind of worn leather and wax, like a candle that's been burning from both ends over the length of a long spell. You'll catch a flash of her golden eyetooth if you see her smiling, which isn't often. She is stoic and silent unless something needs saying. She's too busy listening. She don't talk to hear her head rattle, she reminds us, and suggests we do the same. She keeps a Bible on her bedside table, and she can read it just fine, thank you very much.

And it was her plain logic that gave us freedom to say *dead as a doornail* and *ugly as homemade sin* and *dumber than a coal bucket* without feeling

like we owed somebody a sorry or an explanation. Those there are plain words, you see, and they're not easily misunderstood. Too many of us go around throwing sorries at people when we ain't got a thing to be apologizing for. Plain words and wise whispers need no sorries.

And she'd go out in the pale light of the mornings and collect the herbs and berries and other gifts that God and the mother mountain had left for her, and she'd carry them home and concoct teas and potions and medicinal spirits that could cure a cough or an aching ear or a sour belly. She knew which creepers and vines to pick from and which to leave for the birds or the pixie lights. In her hands she held the fire, that healing fire, that she got from her own granny, who up and left when the wild called. That fire cured many a wart and ache with nothing more than a stroke of her skillful hands and a click of her jaw, because you have to hold your mouth right, you know.

Granny claimed the Old Regular Baptist persuasion, like her granny and her mama before her, and a right plentiful handful of those church ladies cast warnings and judgments on Granny and called her a *witch* for conjuring up her teas and clicking her jaw and taking off warts the curious way she did, and told her that she'd go to Hell, that foreboding place with a tormenting devil and eons worth of pitiful souls frying up like Sunday chicken in the depths of a lake of flames. Those folks weren't very good at whispering. Listening, neither. She told them that she'd never seen hide nor hair of that devil they taunted her with, and she'd be much obliged if they'd mind their own business. *God knows my name*, she whispered to them, but they were too loud to hear. She was told to sit in the back of the church house for her defiance, and she told them she'd do them one better, and she never sat foot over that door sill again.

Sarah Catherine Bentley (far right), my 2nd great granny. Left October 11, 1942, when the wild called.

Only fools know everything, she reminded them, for all the good it did. Plain words can only be understood when folks ain't flapping their own jaws. She told us girls that those church ladies were some of the most hostile and angry souls she'd ever shared a bench with, and good Lord, wouldn't God would be ashamed of them. Bitter and wrathful folks die off like one of those ol' feral cats. Their heads and mouths are too full of their own noise to hear the wild calling.

But she wasn't sad. And she wasn't sorry. A gal with deep roots don't fear a little wind.

Oh, and these here are some deep roots, old gals, deeper than any rabbit hole on the mountain. We are the far-reaching branches and flowering nettles that stemmed from Granny, you know. We're a regular Granny bramble, briers and all. We're Granny's girls, every stoic one of us. And I reckon plain beats pretty to death, just as she said it would. But plain can be as beautiful as can be, and there's a world of difference between beautiful and pretty. We girls know this. Beauty doesn't up and leave town when youth, like the fragile flower it is, has bloomed for its last season. Beauty is permanent. And it is not beholden to anything or anybody.

Some things are too beautiful for this world. Some people, too. Their shine is just too bright. Some folks listen to the wise whispers and have done so long enough to trust the plain words the most. They are the ones that hear the call and *leave*. Others of us have to listen a little harder, but we're trying. Some of the loudest words are those that were never said at all, you know. But the best of sentiments are the plain ones, the beautiful ones, the ones that can't be misunderstood, and sister, Granny had a wealth of them, all of which she passed on to us.

Don't go looking for a storybook lover, gal. Cinderella ain't the only one who disappears after midnight; plenty an old boy is gone before morning, too. Folks love bad news, and they'll spread it like a fire hotter than those church ladies warned Granny about. Their mouths are the devil's radio. Mean people heal faster, and dirty money lasts longer than money earned. Just look around and you'll see. Just because a lot of folks show up at your funeral don't mean you were a good person; maybe they're just coming to make sure you're dead. It's not a sin to be stupid, but it should be. You'll have one or two friends that will always owe you blood or money, and you'll likely never see neither. Chalk it up to lessons learned and go off and sit somewhere to quiet your soul. Anger makes too much noise. Some folks ain't ever gonna like you no matter what you do, and that ain't any of your business. Most folks are decent and good, but it only takes one to spoil you. Don't let them. If you can't leave somebody better than you found them, let them be. And when given the opportunity to shut up, take it. The last word always tastes like shit. Always.

Alwilda Green, my maternal 2nd great granny. Born in 1884. No record of her leaving exists.

Nowadays those natural potions and warming salves from the mother mountains are gathered up and made into teas and ointments and sold at the Kroger and the Walgreens. There are folks that practice massage therapies and work the kinks and ailments out of tired bodies. Those folks can lay a stupor on you enough to lull you to right to sleep like a regular spell. Some of them poke needles into our skin and promise relief of pains and set hot rocks atop our backs and let their healing fire etch away at our agonies. Oh, Granny would get a kick out of that. She'd marvel at preachers on the

television, too, wearing their ivory suits and shiny shoes and laying their hands on folks, and claiming to cure everything from lumbago to leprosy. And instead of putting those old boys out of the church house, those loud and angry folks write them checks. I reckon ivory suits and limousines are expensive.

We ain't sad. And we ain't sorry. And sometimes, the plainest of things and sentiments are so easily understood that some folks miss them completely. I can see Granny's golden eyetooth flashing with a grin at the thoughts of it. *Dumber than a coal bucket*, she'd say, and we'd have to agree.

Oh, yes. Some folks are too beautiful for this world, plain words and wise whispers and all. And still, some of us have to listen a little harder to hear them. Above the noise of the crowd, above the constant chatter and gussied up adjectives and compliments and shiny shoes. But all we really have to do is listen hard, and listen well. And we'll hear the call, when it comes, just as it did for Granny. And we're listening, too. And we hear the words, plain and wise, and we'll remember that some folks die off. Some don't. Some of us just leave. And one bright day the wild will call, and we'll be *gone*.

Just like that.